



THE MAN WHO STOLE THE WORLD

**PART 1 BY RIXOMATIC
ILLUSTRATIONS BY FRAMESTORE**

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Part 1 by Rixomatic
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i. Rixomatic

Halifax watched the birth of the Worldship and stifled a yawn. Everybody around him oohed and aahed as though it was the most spectacular thing in the history of humanity. And, he thought bitterly, it might actually have a chance at the title. But he was completely, unutterably bored. The fact that building planetoids took for-fucking-ever was one of the reasons that he quit being an engineer in the first place. The other was that the nanobots got to do all of the fun stuff.






Though he couldn't see the mouth of the Drydock from the observation platform, he knew what it looked like: a continent-wide ring of mountain-sized nanoforges, each shaped like a cupped palm on a stumpy, 600-mile wide wrist. Their sheer, inward faces glowed with an orange-white ferocity that hurt your brain to look at it, the waste light of the nanoforges doing their molecular boogaloo. He remembered that ache, like dull hot fingers pressed against the backs of your eyes and the underside of your jaw, digging into your sinus cavities like scavenging voles while a fist tried to squeeze your brainstem into paste.







The Hangover of the Gods, his compatriots called it, from staring into the fires of creation. A small price to pay, they bragged, as they got drunk enough to drown out the pain.



The forges were devouring the planet they sat on from the inside out, enormous taproot feeders snaked deep into the mantle to siphon up the raw magma to be gnashed and masticated and eventually spat out according to blueprints that Halifax had written.

Building the Worldship required a world—or most of one, anyway—so they'd designed the Drydock to cannibalize a planet. Which planet ended up dying to feed their dream didn't matter at all to the engineers, so it was cruel serendipity rather than capricious random chance that had destroyed his home.

Genevieve's World had simply been the closest match to the resource profile for the Worldship's schema. His schema. In the end, Halifax had taken it personally anyway. He laughed bitterly, and the other observers nearby—mostly human, though a number of Remotes stood out garishly—pretended to ignore him.





“It’ll take weeks before anything interesting happens,” he told the little boy standing next to him, pale and pasty, with the too-bright eyes that meant a Rider onboard. Halifax wondered what the pocket AI was to the boy—a teacher? A parent? God? The boy looked at him, then turned to his mother to ask a question in another language. Halifax laughed again, and with a final glance at the still incredible sight on the horizon, walked away.

The Worldship—astonishing achievement that it was—looked like a growth, a tumor, eating his planet as it had eaten his career and his life. Halifax had loved it and hated it and washed his hands of the whole goddamn thing.

An aerial photograph of a vast, snow-covered mountain slope. The terrain is rugged with visible ridges and gullies. In the lower right quadrant, a small, dark object with four glowing orange lights is visible on the snow. The lighting suggests a bright, sunny day, with strong shadows and highlights on the snow.

And now he was going to steal it.

He couldn't stop grinning as he placed the call to Koche.

In the cold, spartan room that was her current home, Koche grimaced at the tickle in her mind. She knew what it meant: a call on the ansible. And only Hal could be calling. She flipped to the realverse and stretched, vertebrae popping from disuse.



Climbing naked out of her couch, she glanced around in the vain hope that she hadn't missed lunch.

Outside the transparent walls, the sky was a black dome washed with billions of impossibly clear, bright stars.

Along the near horizon, dawn was brightening quickly and the walls began dimming at the bottom.

Out on the icefield, a lone Leeb sped towards the nearest strand of the Snare on a jetsled, throwing up a glittering plume of snow.





The strand was massive, a mile-wide column rooted to the ice, and was doubly impressive grouped among its six fellows. They dotted the icefield like a copse of old-growth forest in the land of the frost giants, stretching skywards as far as she could see unaided. As the dawn broke, the dayline sped down the strands towards the ground, creating the illusion that they were growing even larger.

“Hal,” she answered, the ansible stutter barely audible for once, “is this important?”

“Nope, I’m bored.” he sounded cheerful, rarely a good sign.





“Hal.” Annoyance crept into her voice. “You have work to do. So do I.”

“I know what work I want to do, baby,” the cheeseball innuendo was comforting, but sounded forced.

Koche giggled in spite of herself, “I know, and believe me, I’d like nothing better than a little... work out here.” She didn’t need to force the longing into her voice. “But Leeb frowns on us using his precious blacknet anse for telesex.”

“Is he there?”

Her pause told him, but she answered anyway. “He’s always here.”

“Put him on.”





End of Part 1

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About this story:

This story was born as an experiment by io9.com as a variation on the “exquisite corpse” method of story creation. An exquisite corpse is a storytelling method where the narrative is collectively assembled by a group of individuals. Each writer adds to the body of work by advancing the story where the last writer left off. In this version of the exquisite corpse, artists from the incredible visual effects firm Framestore participated in advancing the story, too.

Parts 1 and 2 were written by Rixomatic and TinyPterosaur, respectively. The top-voted conclusion to the story was written by Graeme Bennett.



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About Framestore:

The Framestore art department has done VFX and concept design for countless companies and studios, and has worked on movies like Captain America, Sherlock Holmes: Game of Shadows and several Harry Potter movies. The company produced visual effects for Alfonso Cuarón's Gravity and the Keanu Reeves samurai epic 47 Ronin. They also developed the zombie concept designs for World War Z.

The rights to publish the completed story and images were awarded to Graeme Bennett, with thanks to Framestore, Rixomatic, TinyPterosaur and io9.com for their contributions.